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ABSTRACT

This speech about the history and development of the community college in the United States was delivered at a seminar entitled "New Options for Higher Education in Latin America: Lessons from the Community Colleges Experience." The author gives a brief history of the development of the community college, discusses the mission of community colleges today, and explains how these colleges will remain vital in the future. Although the first community college was established in 1901, it was not until after World War II and the passage of the G. I. Bill of Rights that growth increased. Both today and historically, community colleges have been gateways to higher education in America. The mission statements of community colleges reflect the comprehensive nature of these institutions--more than providers of courses for transfer to a baccalaureate program, they offer lifelong learning opportunities, revitalization for the local communities they serve, and economic development. The author predicts that community colleges will thrive in the future because they are capable of rapid change; willing to add transnational and global dimensions to their missions and programs to reflect the changing demographics of America and world globalization trends; and are involved with K-12 institutions, community organizations, and four-year colleges and universities. (LD)

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THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE UNITED STATES

Gail O. Mellow

Presented at the Seminar on
New Options for Higher Education
In Latin America:
Lessons from the Community Colleges Experience
(Sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank
and the Harvard Graduate School of Education)
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The History and Development of Community Colleges in the United States

Dr. Gail O. Mellow, President
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Good morning! And welcome back to our ongoing dialogue on higher education. I would like to express my appreciation for the invitation from the InterAmerican Development Bank and the Harvard Graduate School of Education to participate in this symposium, and to have the opportunity to present a brief history of America's community colleges, the multiple missions that have evolved for two-year institutions in the United States, and certain policy issues that have national implications.

At the outset, permit me to suggest that community colleges might very well be American higher education's best-kept secret. To pursue my hypothesis, let me propose a test: If I were to ask you to name the top five or ten research universities in the United States, or the five or ten best liberal arts colleges, or the strongest state universities, I bet that all of you could come up with your own lists. But how would you do if I were to ask you to rank the five or ten best community colleges in the country? Now, don't worry, I'm not going to test you any further. I suspect, however, that when we talk about the nation's community colleges, we often seem becalmed in a vast Sargasso Sea, lacking the necessary information about the history of community colleges in the United States that would permit us to understand their ongoing connection to the spirit and vitality of both American higher education and the communities that two-year institutions serve.

As you are know, American higher education has evolved historically from a handful of colleges —the Harvards of colonial times— to more than three thousand colleges and universities today. Yet many segments of higher education today are not fully responsive to change. You might have heard the notion that it's far easier to move a cemetery than it is to change a college or university —although both deal with a similar product. Based on my own academic travels and experience, I see a kernel of truth in this assessment. Yet when we consider the history of community colleges in this country, we see them constantly evolving and managing change and responding creatively to new community needs, and it is within this broad context of institutional change that I want to offer my thumbnail historical sketch. So let me share a few facts about the community college movement in the United States:

- Although the first "junior" college was founded in 1901 through the efforts of William Rainey Harper, the President of the University of Chicago, it wasn't until after World War II and the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights that the community college movement, extending public education to millions of Americans previously excluded from higher education, took off.

- Today, there are some eleven hundred community colleges enrolling 10.5 million students — 45% of all undergraduates.
- These students, if you look at their demographic profile, reflect our American present and future. They include:

  42% of all African American students in higher education,

55% of all Latino/a students,
40% of all Asian/Pacific Island students,
and 50% of all Native American students

- To provide access for students who otherwise would not be able to attend college, two-year college tuition is kept low-$1,518 is the annual average.

- Finally, 482,000 Associate of Arts degrees are awarded annually, with 22% of these students transferring to four-year institutions.

What this information suggests is that community colleges today and historically have provided a gateway to higher education for millions of Americans and increasingly for significant numbers of immigrants and international students from around the world. As Paul Elsner, the former chancellor of the Maricopa Community College system in Phoenix, once observed, community colleges are the Ellis Island of American higher education. This analogy is especially true in the nation's urban areas, where the gateway leads to educational and economic opportunity for historically underrepresented populations; for immigrants coping with a new nation and often a new language; and for adults seeking new skills to support their families.

In brief, if we wish to understand the history of American community colleges, we have to embrace the idea that their traditional mission has been the most broadly democratic of any segment in higher education. To tell the full story or history of the community college movement is to trace the effort to make a college education accessible and affordable for everyone —to open college doors to millions of deserving individuals.

In its democratic sense of mission, America's community college movement historically has been part of a broader national movement to expand higher education. We recall, for example, that the first Morrill Act, passed in 1862, expanded access to public higher education, especially in agriculture and what was then fondly termed the "mechanical arts." Moreover, the second Morrill Act, passed in 1890, extended public education to many African Americans by withholding funds from any state denying admission to land grant colleges based on the race of the applicant. So by the time that Chicago's President Harper founded Joliet Junior College back in 1901, there already existed a "democratic idea" to build a community college movement upon.

If we trace the history of America's community colleges in greater detail, we appreciate how our "democratic idea" developed and gathered strength. Thus the "Wisconsin Idea" developed by the University of Wisconsin in 1904, establishing the state as a main service region, would ultimately be translated into the two-year college's mission to serve the local community. And the "California Idea" that evolved in the first two decades of the twentieth century, permitting high schools to offer postgraduate courses while providing for independent junior college districts that ultimately had their own boards, budgets, and procedures, is reflected in the community colleges of today, and especially in the close collaborative links between high schools and two-year colleges. In fact, we currently have three innovative high schools on my college's campus, and we are planning for a fourth.

I do not want to dwell exhaustively on community college history. I think, however, that it is

important to emphasize that by 1921, when the American Association of Junior Colleges was founded, the democratic basis of higher education was already embedded in the movement. Subsequently, the economic and social barriers to higher education in the United States would be broken down progressively: expanded and strengthened by the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944; by the Truman Commission's popularization of community colleges in 1947 that led to the burgeoning of two-year institutions in the 1950's and 1960's —right up to the present focus on internationalizing the mission of the community college and, under President Clinton's recent directive, making a community college education the inalienable right of everyone.

Next year will be the Centennial for America's community colleges, and special national and local events are being planned to celebrate this 100-year history that I have rapidly sketched for you.

In my quick Cook's tour of the American community college movement, I have had to gloss over many of the inherent tensions in the history of two-year colleges. But perhaps as I work a bit more deeply into my subject I can suggest that there remains unfinished business and contending paradigms about the nature of the community college's mission. Consider, for example, this imaginary but typical contemporary community college mission or vision statement:

> *"Institution X, a comprehensive community college, prepares students for successful transfer to four-year colleges, develops a globally competitive workforce, enriches the community with lifelong educational experiences, and provides revitalization, leadership in economic development, community service, and organizational excellence."*

Now, this mission statement I have concocted is not far-fetched, and I suspect that it is reflected in many community college mission statements today. Of course, it is hard to be a **comprehensive** community college precisely because of these multiple missions, all competing for often-scarce resources. As noted, one unique almost universal characteristic of the community college is its low tuition. This fact might cause you to wonder about the typical ways in which community colleges are funded. After all, some community colleges are big enterprises, with annual budgets of more than one hundred million dollars. Where does the money come from? Although there is major variation from state to state, the typical sources of funds are tuition (including state and federal student loans), state aid, and local tax funds. And these funding sources are in constant flux and change, subject to the whims of politicians, the state of the economy, and popular perceptions. In 1975-76, for example, Proposition 13 in California limited local property taxes to 1 percent of assessed valuation, drying up local support and forcing the more than 100 community colleges in California to look to the state for greater funding. Every community college has its own fiscal war stories, but the problems in funding tend to be played out across the three revenue sources mentioned: tuition, local revenues, and state tax revenues. One challenge facing community college leaders is to find ways to find alternative funding sources —a problem that I just happen to be working on at my institution.

Fiscal challenges can also be complicated by both faculty and students. For example, community college teachers are demanding —and getting, often through negotiated union contracts— higher salaries and benefits. Their productivity doesn't necessarily increase but their cost does. In fact, their productivity is already high, for their teaching loads are much heavier than their faculty counterparts at four-year institutions.

Similarly, expanded opportunities for students, ranging from remediation to counseling to occupational upgrading, enhance a community college's democratic, comprehensive mission, but they *cost money*. How then can community colleges sustain their comprehensive mission?

Can two-year colleges be community-based, and "occupational," and geared to the liberal arts and transfer (in other words "collegiate") in their multiple functions? Can the community college today be all things to all people? Or, to put it even more bluntly, has the community college truly been a gateway to democracy? Is the community college movement, in the words of one critic, Steve Zwerling, simply a "dream"?

I suspect that you know my answer. After all, I began my college education as a community college student, and I stand before you today as a community college president. But let me offer three relatively optimistic observations about community colleges and the American dream —and perhaps more appropriately the global dream— for nations around the world are suddenly very much interested in the American community college movement.

First, community colleges will not only survive but prosper because they are capable of rapid change —largely because they are learner-based and community-based. They respond quickly to social and economic needs of the students, parents, and communities they serve. They are integral to what I term the "learning revolution" —a revolution embracing information technology, life-long learning through continuing education, and "learning communities" that link courses in clusters and integrated programs so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning.

Second, community colleges will add transnational or global dimensions to their missions and their programs to reflect the changing demographics of the American nation and world globalization trends. At my college, LaGuardia, we have students from more than 125 countries, including 1,100 international students. We are located in the Borough of Queens, the most ethnically diverse county in the United States, where our local subway line is dubbed "the Orient Express." In such an environment, how could we not foster global education and development? Through a global curriculum, foreign language study, faculty and student overseas exchanges, overseas technical assistance, and linkages to local businesses and industries seeking the international expertise of our faculty, LaGuardia —and many other community colleges across the country— is going global in order to provide the cutting-edge education that students and families will require as they confront a new century.

And third, community colleges will continue to offer fresh perspectives on the American dream because they are at the center of collaboration with K-12 schools, with community organizations, and with four-year colleges and universities. Community colleges in particular craft a compelling educational vision through their collaborative relationships with schools, colleges, and public and private sector corporations and organizations. Community college collaboration today is in vogue. Partnership is in vogue —heightening the sense of the educational continuum; becoming a source of innovative and productive institutional problem solving; and improving the coordination and delivery of services to children, families, and the community.

In closing, I think that the community college movement represents the best of the American dream. When New York City created its Free Academy in 1847 (subsequently City College), it promised to provide higher education for "the children of the whole people." The City University of New York's grew from that initial Free Academy, and its 1972 Master Plan reaffirmed its historical mission: "to help break the cycle of poverty, ignorance, and discrimination —a cycle which has styled the aspirations of a large number of the city's residents."

Today, community colleges, whether in New York or elsewhere, continue to wrestle with their institutional missions. As community college leaders, we face fundamental challenges in shaping and explaining our complex institutional missions as we attempt to forge new paths of educational opportunity for students. In their ongoing attempt to serve **all** students, community colleges are vital to America's future.